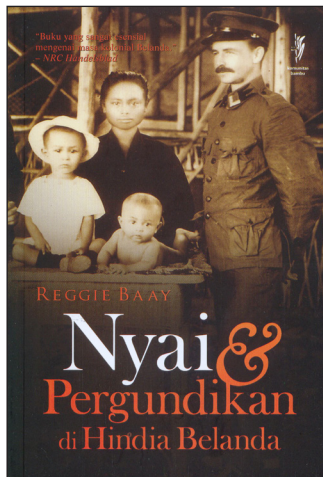


BOOK REVIEWS

Reggie Baay, *Nyai dan pergundikan di Hindia-Belanda*. Translated by Siti Hertini Adiwoso. Jakarta: Komunitas Bambu, 2010, 300 pp. [Original title: *De njai en het concubinaat in Nederlands-Indië*, Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak en Van Gennep, 2008.] ISBN 979-3731-78-8. Price: IDR 64,000 (soft cover).



Christina T. Suprihatin

Faculty of Humanities, University of Indonesia
christina@ui.ac.id

In 2008, Reggie Baay published his book *De njai en het concubinaat in Nederland-Indië* (The nyai and concubinage in the Dutch East Indies). The book was a huge success and was highly appreciated especially by the Dutch Indies community in the Netherlands. It was a revelation for them to learn about the history of the *nyai*, their problems, and misfortunes, from a different point of view.

There has been much discussion about the *nyai*. To mention just one instance, in 1986, Jean Gelman Taylor published an article entitled “Europese en Euraziatische vrouwen in Nederlands-Indië in de VOC tijd” (European and Eurasian women in the Dutch East Indies during the time of the VOC), in the journal *Vrouwen in de Nederlandse koloniën*. This article is one of the main sources the author uses in the present book and Baay repeatedly refers to it in his discussion about the *nyai*, while he discusses the issue from a different point of view. Because Baay discovered that he himself descended from a *nyai*, he adopts a personal approach to the issue. He juxtaposes his personal experience with a historical approach. He describes the history of the *nyai* since the time of the VOC. Baay, who also wrote the novel *De ogen van Solo* (The eyes of Solo, 2006), completed his book with citations from the Dutch East Indies fictional literature. Pamela Pattynama (2011) shows that in an effort to explore the colonial past, fiction may offer an important contribution because it can reveal, silence, or hide things, that were deemed irrelevant and are thus not to be found in official papers.

The author writes about four kinds of concubinage in the Dutch East Indies: the *nyai* during VOC times, the “voluntary” *nyai*, the barracks’ *nyai*, and the plantation *nyai*. During the time of the VOC, a policy that prohibited Dutch

women to come to the Indies. Until the late colonial period, there were not always enough women for all the men in the colony and it was almost a men's world. Concubinage started quite naturally because of the small number of women. Men easily found local women to look after their households or to keep them company.

The book talks about the development of the *nyai* in the Dutch East Indies in a chronological way. Baay dedicated his book to Moenah, a *nyai*, who never had a chance to tell him her life story. Baay tells us about her in the Introduction. In Chapter One, he starts with a description of the living circumstances in VOC business establishments where the first contact with local women occurred. Concubinage was negatively viewed from the very beginning. In Chapter Two, he discusses the growth in numbers of the concubinage. Among the indigenous people, poverty was one of the probable reasons for the increase in the number of voluntary *nyai*: many parents gave their daughters away as voluntary *nyai*. In Chapter Three, Baay explains how the public accepted the concubinage. As long as a European did not have a "European" wife, he took a *nyai* as a "replacement" wife. As a replacement wife, a *nyai* did not have any right on her own life or on that of her children. The relationship between a European man and his children from his concubines usually ended when the man returned to Europe or when he married a "real" wife. Chapter Four shows us how the colonial army depended on the *nyai* in the barracks. Life in the barracks with the *nyai* was considered pernicious and venereal diseases were a hot issue at that time. In Chapter Five, Baay portrays the concubinage in the plantation and he limits himself exclusively to the Deli plantation in North Sumatra. He chose Deli because it was here that the concubinages were the most cruel and poor. Focusing on the Deli concubinage, Baay reveals the relation between European men and local women, which were coolies (contract labour). In Chapter Six, he pays much attention to the children which sprang from these relationships. Most children of mixed blood lived in poverty; there was no law that protected them. In Chapter Seven, Baay paints a different portrait of the *nyai* by showing her from another perspective, that from the eastern point of view. He mentions some examples from Malay literature that describe the positive existence of the *nyai*. Maya Sutedja Liem (2007) translated the stories he used to describe the other side of the *nyai* into Dutch, and the KITLV published Liem's book under the title *De Njai: Moeder van Alle Volken*. In the last Chapter, Baay explains the final phase of the concubinage in the Dutch East Indies. He mentions that Princess Laurentien, Queen Beatrix's daughter-in-law, also has "a *nyai* ancestor". Once again, Moenah comes in picture, as a kind of conclusion. She opens and ends the book. Baay illustrates and enriches his portrait of the *nyai* with photographs and life stories of various *nyai*. The picture on the cover depicts a portrait of Djoemiha with her husband and children. Djoemiha had two children and stayed with her man Alfred until the end.

The stories of the people retold in this book are important aspects in colonial history. Baay succeeded in describing the unequal nature of the

relationship between a *nyai* and her master. *Nyai* were viewed in two different ways; negatively (they were lazy, lustful, and stupid) but at the same time, they had positive characters (loyal, hardworking).

Baay spared himself no effort and he used documents, life stories, letters, and literary citations. The book is a revelation for everybody, also for Indonesians. Fortunately, Komunitas Bambu has published an Indonesian translation of this book in June 2010, entitled *Nyai dan pergundikan di Hindia-Belanda*. Everybody may be descended from a *nyai*, because a *nyai* is not only the ancestors of the Indies people in the Netherlands. Maya Sutedja Liem mentioned that the *nyai* is the mother of all peoples. I agree with her: maybe we all have nephews or cousins in the Netherlands or in other countries (Australia, Canada, America, or New Zealand) where Indies peoples have emigrated after they left Indonesia.

This book is highly recommended: it is worth reading.

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Lian Gouw, *Only a girl; Menantang phoenix*. Translated by Royani Ping. Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2010, viii + 385pp. ISBN 9789-979-22-6233-9. Price: IDR 65,000 (soft cover).

Dewi Anggraeni

School of Political and Social Inquiry,
Faculty of Arts, Monash University
dewi.anggraeni@monash.edu

Readers have no problems in believing that producing non-fiction works such as essays, academic papers, investigative journalistic pieces and opinion articles, requires a great deal of research, thinking and analysis, yet many